No. 14

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

"It matters more to me than you realize," he replied. "You are apt to kill a human life in your present vicious temper. For your own sake I ask you to be reasonable."

R. of M. C., No. 14.

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FOR A LONG TIME Philip Gordon stood there and gazed upon the prostrate figure. His eyes wandered from the ghost-like features to the thin hands lying on the coverlet, then back again. He made no attempt to halt the tear which rolled down his cheek. That one tear was followed by another, and still another.

Then suddenly, overcome by emotion, he bent over, seized one of the girl's hands and kissed it.

"Ruth—Ruth!" he moaned. "I have been a blind fool. I pray that God may be merciful to me for what I have done to you. But I promise faithfully to take better care of you, little sister. Never again will I allow another's influence to dominate me."

There was a slight fluttering of the eyelids, and then Ruth awoke. She stared at the face above her, incredulous. Then she burst into tears.

"Phil—Phil!" she sobbed, and hid her face, shivering with fright.

"That's alright," he said soothingly. "Don't be afraid, dear. I am not going to scold you."

"And—and you won't send me back to that horrible asylum?" Ruth pleaded. "You'll let me stay here with you? Oh, will you do that?"

"You will never leave this house with my sanction," he told her, his voice ringing with determination. "Don't you worry about that, Ruth. I have done you a great wrong, and I ask you to forgive me."

"Forgive you?" Ruth smiled pitifully. "Oh, that is so easy. But your—your wife, what will she——"

"No matter what her opinion may be in this matter, I am going to have my way," Phil assured her. "Miss Desmond here will take care of you, and I hope you two will become the best of friends."

"I—I thank you with all my heart," responded

Ruth, and fell to weeping again. After some little time she added these significant words: "Perhaps I may become useful to you in some way, brother. Perhaps I can do something that will make you as happy as you once were."

Phil Gordon attached no significance to what his sister was saying. Holdling out his hand to her, he assured her again that she had nothing to fear in the future and that his home was hers as long as she cared to stay.

During the conversation Marie stood at the head of the bed with a constant feeling of dread.

She was deathly afraid that Ruth would forget herself and by an unguarded word disclose that "Miss Desmond" was the former Mrs. Gordon. She did not experience any relief until Phil left the room.

"I owe all this to you," said Ruth gratefully, extending both of her hands to the governess. "Ah, God was good when He sent you back here."

"You owe me nothing," Marie answered, swallowing hard a few times. "You owe everything to Him who shapes the destiny of all human beings. I am only an instrument in His hands."

"I love you," whispered the young girl, and closed her eyes in sleep.

Marie bent over and imprinted a kiss upon the pale brow. Then she straightened up and hurried away, shutting the door softly behind her.

As soon as she reached the seclusion of her room, she sat on the edge of the bed and folded her hands across her breast in deep reflection.

"Oh, that poor girl," she murmured. "I can well understand why Alice wanted her out of the way. But I'll stand by Ruth no matter what the consequences may be."

But through her maze of thoughts came the words Ruth Gordon had spoken to her brother. It was this one sentence:

"Perhaps I can do something that will make you as happy as you once were."

What had Ruth meant by saying that? Was it perhaps her intention to open Phil's eyes to the fact that his first wife was living under the same roof with him as the governess of his children?

It was not at all impossible for Ruth to do that very thing. She had always been impulsive. That was one of her outstanding characteristics.

"No, that must not be!" Marie breathed. "Ruth must remain silent. But, oh, it is so hard to be the plaything of fate."

Chapter 44

THE SPY.

THE DOMESTIC AFFAIRS of the Gordons were in somewhat of a muddle. The relations existing between Philip and his second wife were far from being ideal. And not without reason. Philip was bearing up bravely under conditions which would have sent the average man to an institution for the mentally unbalanced.

There could not be the least doubt that his second venture into matrimony had been a bitter disappointment. Existing conditions and circumstances made that exceedingly plain.

Before he married the beautiful Alice Procter, disaster was predicted by a few of his more intimate friends.

They had pointed out to him a few characteristics of this social butterfly, characteristics most emphatically not conducive to prolonged wedded bliss.

Some of them had even gone to the extreme of hinting darkly at Alice's close relations with Jack Hoover. But to all of this, Phil had turned a deaf ear.

Quite naturally Alice had carefully concealed her true self. She had showed a motherly interest in the Gordon children. In the presence of Phil she had gushed and mushed over them.

She seemed intensely interested in their welfare and that of their handsome father.

This, coupled with an almost irresistible charm, were the factors which caused Phil to come to the conclusion that Alice Procter was the one woman who could

make him forget the tragic termination of his first marriage.

But a few weeks after the wedding, Alice began showing her real character. Phil's children annoyed her. They were an unmitigated nuisance.

And when Phil continually lavished his affection upon them, her annoyance turned to unreasonable jealousy and then vicious hatred. She employed the most despicable methods in attempting to separate the father from his children.

As the mistress of the Gordon household, Alice was dictatorial and overbearing. Right or wrong, her orders had to be carried out.

If Phil failed to gratify her every whim, she went into hysterics. When tears were unavailing, she threatened to leave him and go back to her father.

Ah, if Phil had only allowed this woman to make good her threat. But he was entirely too sensitive to the opinion of his friends whose warning he remembered.

He was determined not to give them a chance to say: "We told you so."

But this was not the only reason why Phil bore his heaevy burden without complaint. The unfortunate termination of his first marriage was still being discussed in some quarters.

He was very well aware of the fact that quite a few of his friends still held a brief against him for the way he treated Marie.

If he and Alice separated, more ugly conclusions would be formed about him without knowledge of facts. And so Philip Gordon tried vainly to make the best of a bad bargain.

As a rule he was not the kind of a man who could be influenced against his better judgment. But in Alice he found a woman whose persistence was unequaled.

What she failed to accomplish with her passionate kisses and coaxing, she gained through threats.

In the case of poor Ruth Gordon, Alice went the absolute limit. She hated the young girl venomously because she remained loyal to the memory of the first Mrs. Gordon.

Alice had overheard Ruth expressing herself in the presence of some of the servants about the wonderful virtues Marie had possessed. From that moment on the second Mrs. Gordon went to every extreme in order to have her husband's sister removed.

Unfortunately it was true that the young girl suffered now and then from her old ailment. There were moments when she betrayed by her actions that her mind was still a little unbalanced.

But she was as docile as a lamb and at no time did she show signs of becoming dangerous.

Phil Gordon loved his only sister dearly. He tried to shield her as much as he could. But when Ruth became the constant bone of contention between him and his wife, he came to the conclusion that something had to be done.

This condition of affairs could not be allowed to exist indefinitely. Already the servants were talking about the frequent quarrels between himself and Alice. Some of the gossip had even been carried to outsiders, and he had a wholesome dread of having Ruth's ailment and the cause of it discussed.

"You'll either send that crazy girl where she belongs, or I'll leave the house!" had been his wife's ultimatum.

And Phil gave in, though with obvious reluctance.

The moment of parting was one he would not forget to the end of his days. Ruth, the tears streaming down her face, had clung to him, begging piteously not

to be taken away.

Phil almost hated Alice that moment. But in this crisis he allowed himself to be swerved in his wife's favor.

Domestic peace was paramount. He tried to ease his conscience by thinking that Ruth would have a better chance to recover in the sanitarium.

But the day after her departure he regretted having listened to Alice in the disposition of his sister's case.

And then came the unexpected return of Ruth. Small wonder that he gave way to emotion when he saw her. Any man with a heart would have wept upon seeing an only sister in the pitiful condition of Ruth Gordon.

Phil probably made a mistake in not going to his wife and make known the fact that Ruth had come home. But he had no particular desire to precipitate another quarrel.

Besides, he wanted a few days to think the matter over.

He wanted to be able to present a convincing argument to Alice why his sister must be allowed to remain in the house.

In the meantime Ruth was receiving the best of care and loving attention in Annie's room. For the first two days she did nothing but eat and sleep.

Marie and Annie never said a word to any of the other servants of Ruth's return. They had promised to remain silent until the master of the house gave them leave to speak.

But there was one person whose suspicion had been aroused, and that person was Nora Evans, the second Mrs. Gordon's confidential friend and maid. Nora made her suspicions known to Mrs. Jenkins, the housekeeper, one morning.

"What's wrong with Annie?" she asked, darting a

keen glance at the latter.

"Why, Nora?" Mrs. Jenkins countered.

"She spends so much time in her room. Surely you must have noticed that."

"No, I didn't," the housekeeper denied.

"Then you must be blind," Nora snorted. "Well, I have noticed it. And I noticed another thing. Why does Annie carry meals to her room? Last night I saw her with a tray. There is something at the bottom of this, I tell you."

Mrs. Jenkins shrugged her shoulders with characteristic indifference.

"I've got enough to do to mind my own business," she answered sagely. "I wish other people would do the same."

Nora Evans ignored the rebuke.

"I just wonder how long this mushy friendship between Annie and the new governess is going to last," she said, her eyes dark with malice. "Those two are as thick as peas in a pod. I don't like either of them, and I don't care who knows it."

"You don't like many people, Nora," the housekeeper retorted with an ironical grin. "I think you are a darn fool."

That was too much for Mrs. Gordon's favorite and spy. She seemed about to make an angry reply, then evidently changed her mind and stalked from the room with a disdainful toss of her head.

Up the stairs she went and met Annie in the hall.

"Say, Annie," she accosted the latter, "I saw you carry some of the magazines to your room yesterday. There is a certain copy of the Saturday Evening Post I am looking for. I wonder if you have it."

Annie showed her confusion a little too plain. She turned pale, and her hands began to wander restless up

and down her blouse.

What caused this was not so much Nora's request as the peculiar look in her eyes and a smile which was extremely unpleasant. She quickly sensed the motive behind that.

"I may have the magazine you are looking for," she said in a steady voice. "I'll go and see. Just wait here a moment."

"Oh, nevermind," answered Nora, endeavoring to brush past Annie. "Don't bother now if you are busy. I'll go to your room and find it myself. You won't mind, will you?"

But Annie did mind very much for several reasons.

She did not trust Mrs. Gordon's spy. She was not to be trused under any circumstances. Then Nora was the last person on earth she cared to have know that Ruth Gordon was being hidden in her bedroom.

If Nora saw poor Ruth, Mrs. Gordon would be informed the next minute. For a moment Annie was at a loss what to say in order to prevent trouble.

"You—you won't be able to find those magazines so easily," she declared, the words coming in jerks. "They are in one of my dresser drawers. You know," she added with a foolish smile, "I couldn't allow you to rummage through them, Nora."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to do that," the latter said, grinning. "But would you mind if I went with you and help you find them?"

"I'll bring them to you in a moment," replied Annie ignoring Nora's suggestion.

She ran swiftly toward her room. At the door she stopped and looked back. Nora Evans was nowhere to be seen. With the key hidden in her blouse she unlocked the door and entered.

This was followed by a click which indicated that the door was being locked again from within.

Nora Evans, who had quickly secreted herself behind the drapery of a hall window, watched the procedure, her suspicions aroused anew.

"You are not half as smart as you think you are, Annie," she snickered. "That kind of a bluff don't work at all with me. I'll find out what you are hiding in your room before this day is over."

Presently Annie returned, carrying a number of magazines. Nora looked them over rather indifferently and selected a recent issue of the Saturday Evening Post.

"Thanks," she said, and proceeded downstairs.

But Nora Evans did not remain downstairs very long. She suddenly found a good many things which had to be attended to.

She made numerous trips to the boudoir of her mistress, and she kept well informed as to the movements of Annie and Miss Desmond.

The latter seemed to be dividing her time between the nursery and Annie's room. Nora's suspicion was at fever heat. And she hated the beautiful governess with characteristic vindictiveness.

She hated Marie's obvious air of superiority. She hated her for having told the truth about the cruel treatment she accorded the children.

Ever since her coming to the Gordon home, Nora had patiently waited for a chance to "get something on Marie."

It was well toward evening when Nora's opportunity came. From her usual hiding place she saw Miss Desmond come from Annie's room. In her evident agitation that latter failed to lock the door.

The moment she was out of sight, Nora glided a-

cross the hall. She turned the knob, opened the door noiselessly, and peered in.

What she saw surpassed all expectations. There were two beds in Annie's room, and on one of them, apparently sound asleep, lay Ruth Gordon.

For a time she stood dumbfounded. How had Ruth come here? What would Mrs. Gordon say who had moved heaven and earth to get rid of "that idiot," as she called the unfortunate girl?

Nora Evans quickly saw plenty of trouble for Annie as well as Miss Desmond.

There was not the least doubt in her mind that both of them would be peremptorily dismissed. Ah, at last her chance to get even had come. With a grin of malicious triumph on her face, she hastened toward Mrs. Gordon's boudoir.

Alice had just risen from her afternoon nap, and sat turning the pages of a late magazine.

Dresses and all the finery and empty fritter in which the shallow mind finds pleasure were the very element of the second Mrs. Gordon.

How to show her beauty to the best advantage was the sole aim of her existence and occupied her every thought.

Alice had not changed one whit. She was still a rarely magnificent human animal, and no more.

She was utterly deficient in those qualities of heart and mind which are the attributes of true and noble womanhood.

At Nora's sudden and rather hasty entrance, Mrs. Gordon looked up expectantly. She saw at once by the expression on the maid's face that something out of the ordinary had happened.

"Well, what is it?" she demanded with a show of impatience.

'Oh, I don't know how to begin," cried Nora, out of breath.

"Begin what?" Alice exclaimed, sitting up very straight.

"To tell you what I have seen, Mrs. Gordon."

The latter paled.

"Come on. Out with it, Nora. As a rule you are not afraid to talk. Tell me at once what you saw."

The maid plunged into the story.

She told how she had become suspicious of the actions of Annie and Miss Desmond, and how she had at last, after days of watchful waiting, discovered Ruth Gordon's presence in Annie's room.

"Is—is what you have been telling me now the absolute truth?" the mistress of the house inquired with deadly calm.

"Indeed it is," vociferated Nora. "Didn't I see her with my own eyes? And she was soundly asleep. It was that Miss Desmond who smuggled her into the house and no one else."

"No doubt about that," Alice replied, a dangerous glint in her eyes. "Well, it is about time that person was shown her place. She has an idea that because my husband backed her up once, she can get away with anything. But this is too much. She is going to leave this house this very night. She——"

Out of breath and overpowered by anger she could no longer control, Mrs. Gordon sprang up and began to pace the floor in long strides.

"You find my husband!" she cried shrilly, and turning to the maid. "Find him at once and tell him that I am waiting to see him here in my boudoir. There is something I must say to him that must be said now, right now!"

When Nora Evans did not leave the room at once,

Alice showed the usual signs of becoming hysterical.

"Good God, why don't you go?" she screamed.

"I am going at once," replied Nora with an exasperating grin. "But I want to be present when you tell your dear husband what you think of him."

"Why, Nora?"

"Because I hate him," was the quick retort. "And you know I have reasons. I hate him as much as I hate this doll-faced governess."

Alice shook her head in denial.

"No, Nora," she said, quickly becoming rational again. "I can't afford to take any such chances. Phil would resent your presence in the room when I demand an accounting. He might insist upon you being discharged for impudence. And what would I do without you? I need you more than ever now."

Nora Evans shrugged her angular shoulders.

"Alright," she assented grudgingly and moved toward the door.

"Tell my husband not to keep me waiting," Mrs. Gordon shouted after her.

"I'll tell him," the maid called over her shouldler, and disappeared.

Chapter 45

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

NORA EVANS chuckled with malicious satisfaction as she hasted to comply with the orders of her mistress. She found the master of the house in the library and quickly delivered the message given her by her infuriated mistress.. His only reply was a curt nod. Perhaps ten minutes had elapsed when Philip Gordon entered his wife's boudoir. As long as he knew Alice, he had never seen her in such a rage.

She pounced upon him like an infuriated tigress. Her features were positively hideous as she struggled for adequate words to express herself.

"What position do I occupy in your house, Phil?" she panted.

"Why — what do you mean?" he stammered. "What is wrong now?"

"I want you to answer my question!" Alice shouted, trembling with wrath. "What position do I occupy here?"

"You are the mistress of the household," Phil answered quietly.

"Well, if that is the case, how can Miss Desmond assume that role?"

Phil forced a smile.

"So far as I know Miss Desmond has never——"

"She has!" Alice broke in vehemently. "She has and you know it."

"Please control yourself," he responded, refusing to become excited or give way to anger. "I know you don't like Miss Desmond. What is your grievance a-

gainst her now?"

Alice advanced a step and stared at her husband with flashing eyes.

"I found out a little while ago that—that your crazy sister has returned," she exclaimed, her hands clenching and unclenching. "No doubt she managed to escape from the asylum. I don't care so much about that, but I object to Miss Desmond taking it upon herself to keep Ruth hidden under this roof without my knowledge.

"Apart from the fact that I won't live in the same house with a dangerous lunatic, I resent the high-handed action of that governess. But my patience is at an end. Miss Desmond must be discharged at once, and Annie goes with her.

"I happen to know that these two have made common cause against me from the very beginning. The very idea of that person assuming such a responsibility without first consulting me. I'll show her."

Philip did not reply immediately. He was obviously disconcerted and a pained expression marred his handsome features.

"You are mistaken, Alice," he spoke at length. "Miss Desmond has not assumed an unwarranted responsibility. What she did was done with my consent and I——"

"With your consent?" Alice started up as if shot. "You mean to stand there and tell me that you sanctioned——" She could not finish the sentence.

"I did that," Philip admitted frankly. "Miss Desmond found poor Ruth hiding in the tower in a pitiable condition, and she notified me at once. In order to spare you any excitement, I requested Miss Desmond to take care of my sister and to keep her presence in the house secret for the time being. And I have only this to add:

Ruth will not be sent back to the sanitarium.

"No matter how you rave, my poor sister remains in my house. I made the mistake of allowing you to influence me against her once, but it will never happen again. I ask you to look at the matter in a reasonable light. See if you can't find a little sympathy in your heart for Ruth."

Alice gave her husband a vicious glance.

She realized with a bitter pang that she could no longer rule him. Her anger at being thus opposed, rose to towering heights.

But before she gave voice to her outraged feelings, her husband was speaking again.

"There is no good reason why you and I should quarrel about my sister coming back," he said in a conciliatory tone. "The poor girl looks like a skeleton. It would be worse than cruel to send her back, I haven't the heart to do it and neither would you have if you saw her."

"What is to be done in Ruth's case can be settled later on," Alice shot back quickly. "Right now we must come to an understanding in another matter, one far more important. This impudent governess must be discharged at once. I insist upon that."

The lines about Philip Gordon's mouth tightened.

"I am sorry to differ with you, Alice," he declared with dignified calmness. "Miss Desmond must remain. She is indispensable to the children. You know very well what a time we had finding the right kind of a governess for them. And now, that we have one who can be trusted, I don't propose to discharge her because of a foolish whim of yours."

"It is not a foolish whim," the second Mrs. Gordon disagreed, emphasizing the words with a stamp of her foot. "As the mistress of your home I have every right

to demand that person's discharge. She has ignored me She has practically defied me. And I should stand for that? No—no, I tell you!"

Alice had worked herself into a frenzy. She stood facing her husband with her hands clenched and her face distorted.

"Don't try me too far!" she screamed. "Don't, Phil, or you'll regret it!"

When he attempted to put a hand on her shoulder she shook it off with a vicious jerk. What little womanliness she possessed was gone. Her features were haggard with rage. The gleam in her eyes was that of a raving maniac.

"Please let me talk to you," Phil begged. "This won't do at all, Alice. You are to become a mother. Remember your condition."

"My condition?" she retorted shrilly. "Much you care about that. What does it matter?"

"It matters more to me than you seem to realize," he replied. "You are apt to kill a human life in your present vicious temper. For your own sake I ask you to be calm and reasonable."

But Alice was past all that. Her whirling mind held only one thought. Her hate-filled soul had only one desire. Miss Desmond must leave the house.

Again and again she insisted upon that, and each time Phil turned a deaf ear. Capricious and high-strung as she was, hysteria seized her.

With a shriek that was heard all over the house, Alice threw herself into a chair, then fainted.

Thoroughly frightened, Phil called the maid. Between them they carried the still unconscious woman over to her bed. Even before he left the room to call the family physician, he noticed something which gave him a shock.

The next minute found him at the telephone, talking to Dr. Van Buren.

"Come as quickly as you can," Gordon urged.

Dr. Van Buren hesitated.

"Hello — hello!" cried Phil into the transmitter. "You heard me, didn't you, doctor?"

"Yes, I heared you," the physician acknowledged. "But don't you think you had better try someone else on this case? Mrs. Gordon might feel more comfortable."

"But why—why?" excitedly.

"Mrs. Gordon has no particular liking for me," Dr. Van Buren answered. "From the very beginning she seemed to resent my treating your boy. Perhaps you do not know it, but your wife has never spoken to me. This makes it rather awkward, don't you think?"

"Don't let my wife's former conduct toward you stand in the way, old man," Phil returned. "I apologize for that. Now please come at once. I am afraid it is a case of life and death."

"Alright," the physician acceded, and hung up the receiver.

Dr. Van Buren's trip to "Oak Manor" was made in record time. Gordon met him at the door and led the way to his wife's boudoir.

Alice appeared to be suffering the most severe pains. She submitted to an examination without a murmur of protest.

If she still disliked Dr. Van Buren, she gave no sign of it. As a matter of fact, however, increasing agony had made her docile. She had begun to realize that a climax dreaded by every married woman was close at hand.

After the physician resorted to the usual method of relieving pain, he drew Phil aside.

"Your wife is to become a mother," he told the

latter. "And all indications point to a premature birth. All cases of this kind are serious. While I hope to pull her through, we must be prepared for the worst. The patient is in a highly nervous state."

Gordon bowed his head and glanced at the quiet figure on the bed.

He reproached himself bitterly for having precipitated a quarrel with Alice by refusing to accede to her demands.

"Do your best, doctor," he said in a awed whisper. "And spare no expense. If you deem it wise, send for a specialist."

Dr. Van Buren vetoed the idea by answering:

"A dozen specialists could not help your wife, Phil. Everything depends upon the patient's strength to pull through the ordeal, for I fear it will go hard with her. What we must have is an experienced and reliable nurse. I think I know one who'll do, and I'll send for her right away."

"Yes, do so by all means," Phil urged, his lips quivering.

While the physician went to telephone for the nurse, Gordon approached the bed and gazed at his suffering wife. Alice was lying on her back, her eyes wide and staring.

The door of his heart opened quickly to a wave of sympathy.

"How do you feel, dear?" he inquired tenderly.

"Oh, horrible," came from the pale lips. "I am going to die, Phil. But I don't care. I suppose you'll be glad if I——"

"Hush!" He placed a hand on Alice's feverish brow and bent over to kiss her. "This is not the time to continue a quarrel or harbor ill feelings. I can't tell you how sorry I am." He swallowed hard. "But—but you

must be brave, dear girl, and don't worry. Dr. Van Buren will pull you through."

"Did he—did he say so, Phil?" she looked at him, her eyes pleading. "Did he say so?"

"Yes," Phil lied tactfully. "But you must do your part, Alice."

The patient was about to speak again, when another spasm of suffering convulsed her features. Her wails became hysterical sobs.

"I am dying—I am dying!" she repeated between sobs. "Oh, please send for my father, Phil. I can not die without seeing him. Oh, what have I done that I should suffer like this. God help—me, I——"

Her voice trailed off into incoherent mutterings, and then unconsciousness took her in its cradling arms.

Presently Dr. Van Buren returned. He examined the patient again, his face very grave.

He knew from experience that the woman could not pass through her ordeal in this state. She must be brought to her senses.

For nearly an hour, he worked, using every method known to medical science. The timely arrival of the trained nurse swerved the issue.

Alice opened her eyes at last and at once became seized by a fit of weeping. The physician administered an opiate with satisfactory results.

Gordon held another whispered conversation with the physician. When the latter heard that the patient had spoken about dying, he showed signs of becoming alarmed.

"That makes it bad," he said. "A patient's state of mind has a tremendous influence over her physical forces. If Mrs. Gordon asked that her father be sent for, I suggest that this be done without delay.

"Now pull yourself together, old man," he added,

when Phil showed signs of breaking down. "Whatever you do, don't let your wife see that you are worried. It will minimize her chances of pulling through."

Gordon straightened up and forced a smile — a pitiful smile.

"Alright, doctor." He squared his shoulders and left the room to get in telephonic touch with Alice's father.

Chapter 46

JOHN PROCTER

JOHN PROCTER was living a lonely life in his big Chicago home. He had wealth and all the comforts wealth can procure, but the happiness his soul craved could not be bought with money. Everything which had made his old life worth living departed that day when, in a fit of anger, he bid his youngest daughter leave home with the adjuration never to return.

Ah, how bitterly he regretted it. What a fool he had been when he thought he could separate two loving young hearts.

He had allowed foolish pride to rule him. He had considered Bob Harding, a fine and ambitious young automobile mechanic, not good enough for his Betty.

Yes, the Procters had always been a proud, aristocratic race. John dwelled upon that fact now with a bitter smile upon his face. For it was this same haughty pride which nearly cost him his life's happiness when still a young man.

And now, as his mind recalled the carefree days of his youth, he realized more and more the blind, unreasonable prejudice of his own action toward Betty.

He himself had married a girl who was poor and below his rank and station. In fact the girl who became his wife under such tragic circumstances had been the willing tool of a smooth adventuress.

John Procter had found happiness in his youth because his stern father relented and made the seemingly impossible come to pass. But he had not been willing to

show the same kindness and justice to his own child.

When he compared Betty's case with his own, as he often did during the hours of cheerless solitude, he was forced to admit his rank injustice to the girl.

Every little detail of his own and only love affair came back to him with renewed vividness. The girl he married had been poor, the same as Bob Harding was poor.

His father had relented, but he himself had remained adamant. And he had sent Betty away into an unknown future.

There was something very pathetic about John Procter as he sat in his favorite chair on the broad veranda this morning. His usually stern features had relaxed into a softness which is the forerunner of tears.

With his moist eyes closed and his hands folded across his breast, he allowed his mind to wander back a good many years.

He was the only heir to the Procter estate which passed from one generation to the next. The love story of his youth was one of those beautiful romances one occasionally reads about but rarely happens in real life.

He was not yet quite twenty when he met the girl of his choice for the first time. It happened one summer morning as he took a stroll through the grounds toward the lake.

Quite unexpectedly he came upon a vision which caused him to rub his eyes. The girl he saw could not be real.

He looked again. Yes, she was real, and she was also the most fascinating tresspasser who had ever violated the sanctuary of the Procter estate.

It was so early in the morning that it did not seem as if she could possibly be posing with an idea of attracting anyone's attention. The girl was simply playing by

herself absolutely unconscious of the rest of the world.

The dance she did was a formless savage thing. The movements of her flashing limbs reminded him of the prancing of a race horse before the barrier is dropped.

John Procter was conscious of a thrill of thankfulness that he was there to see.

Among the young women of his acquaintance there was not one who could compare with the feminine vision he saw now.

The physical proportions of this girl's body were a delight to the eye. Her ankles were very slim and her legs tapered exquisitely up to the hips.

Her skin where it was not covered by her scant bathing suit was rosy-white. Her features, even in the distance, seemed unusually lovely.

John Procter scarcely breathed for fear that she would run away. He stood there in his overalls which he had donned in order to curry his riding horse.

He didn't have many chances to take care of his horse nowadays except during the summer vacation.

John knew little about women—it had not been intended that he should. Woman-hatred was one of the tenets of faith of old Jonathan Procter, John's father, whose heart had been harshly scarred from the mysterious thing that had happened to John's mother.

College life had not widened young John Procter's field of feminine vision very much. He had not been particularly interested in the girls he met in a social way. The awakening thrill had not yet materialized.

Even now he watched the slim venus on the sands in an impersonal fashion, delighting in her symmetry and grace, but quite unconscious of the appeal of sex which doubtless underlay his unintentional spying.

Still, he was sensible to an unmistable regret when

the girl finally quit dancing and plunged headlong into the lake.

In a few moments nothing of her was visible except her head and shoulders. Then suddenly, her head disappeared. It was followed by a gurgling cry for help.

John Procter did not hesitate. He knew what it meant.

The girl, when she failed to reappear, had been sucked under by a treacherous undercurrent. There was not the least doubt in his mind that she would drown unless he rushed instantly to her rescue.

Kicking off his shoes, he ran toward the lake and jumped in. He was a good swimmer. He reached the girl just as she was about to go down for the last time.

"Don't!" he ordered, when she began to struggle. "Lie perfectly still."

The girl obeyed. He swung her slim body across his back and began to swim toward the shore. As soon as his feet touched ground, he changed her position and carried her in his arms.

Even though exhausted as he was, the actual contact with the girl's lovely body gave him a thrill. As he looked her over, he discovered that she was even more alluring at close range.

The features were regular and the mouth was sweet. The wonderfully curved lips had the coloring of red coral.

He could not see her eyes because they were closed. But it was her hair that fascinated him most. Even in its wet condition it curled in long golden ringlets about her temples and shoulders.

John Procter lowered the girl to the sands, but still supported her head with his arms. Very slowly her eyes opened. They were a deep violet. First she smiled at him with her eyes, and then with her lips.

Then she laughed.

"That wasn't very bright of me, was it?" she asked, gently disengaging herself from his support and sitting up. "I had no right to get beyond my depth when I couldn't even swim."

"Oh, that might have happened to anyone," John defended. "You were unfortunate enough to get caught in the undercurrent which is pretty strong."

"I was not speaking about getting nearly drowned," she explained with a merry twinkle in her blue eyes. "I was referring to the fact that I got myself rescued by the wrong man." She sniffed a few times. "You are handsome enough to be the hero life saver I read about. But according to the way you smell you must be only a stable boy on the Procter estate."

"Why, I don't see," began John, puzzled, "what difference does it make who saved you so long as you were pulled out by somebody."

The girl made no reply. She merely smiled.

"I guess I had better be going." She gave him her slim hand, and something in her eyes made Procter want to kiss it, but he did not. "Thanks," she added after a pause, then turned and ran up the beach.

John looked after her, disappointed.

What a strange creature that girl was. Although he did not expect to ever see her again, the next morning found him on the same spot, and this time arrayed in his bathing suit.

The girl was there, dancing again.

"Oh," she said when she saw him.

He could not tell whether her tone conveyed disappointment or pleasure. The girl had on a different bathing suit, and he thought she looked even more beautiful than the day before.

"Shall we go in?" he invited with a gesture tow-

ard the water.

"No one else is apt to come?" she asked, glancing back toward the big house that stood silent at the top of the bluff.

"No," Procter assured her. "Besides, they would not make you leave anyway."

Evidently he had misinterpreted her because she laughed.

It was a laugh that was pleasant to hear. He wondered what he could do to provoke it often. When he reached for her hand she followed him into the water.

They had a glorious time playing in the warm surf. For over an hour they played like two happy, carefree children. John Procter was slowly but surely succumbing to the girl's strange alluring charm.

"You are so nice," she told him as they were about to part. "And I like you very much."

"Will you come here to-night?" he asked. "It will be moonlight."

"I ought not to," she said with a shake of her pretty head.

"But I'll be lonesome if you don't come."

For some little time the girl debated with herself. Finally she nodded.

"Alright, I'll come."

They played again that night like children and again the following morning. By that time the girl was in John Procter's blood.

That afternoon when he went off for a canter with his private instructor, Captain Malcolm, John seemed like a changed young man.

It was Captain's Malcolm's job to see what John did with his time and keep him from getting into any mischief. He surmised instantly that some woman was at the bottom of his pupil's changed manner.

"Who is she?" he asked bluntly.

John, eager to talk about his affair with the mysterious young girl, made a clean breast of it.

Captain Malcolm was now confronted by a nice problem. One of his duties was to report to his employer, old Johnathan Procter, any symptoms of interest in the opposite sex which his son, John, might exhibit.

But Captain Malcolm, though a gruff old soldier he was, had a sincere affection for young John. The idea of getting the boy into trouble was extremely distasteful to him.

But orders were orders, and they must be obeyed. That evening after dinner he reported not very cheerfully to Jonathan Procter.

The old man received the news without visible signs of emotion.

"You have justified your position in my household," he said as the captain finished. "The boy is doubtless a sentimental fool, just as I was——" he paused to contemplate bitterly an episode of the past, "but together you and I can prevent John from making the mistake I made. Send him to me."

But young John was down at the beach with the girl.

She had come to meet him in the dusk. They had played in the water until both grew tired. As they sat in the sand she suddenly held up her lips for him to kiss.

John Procter touched her warm mouth lightly at first.

"Adorable you," he whispered.

After he had held her close for a long time, she pushed him away.

"This hour of moonlight, dear," she whispered, "is all the moonlight we shall ever have in this world."

"Nonsense," the boy protested. "It will be moon-

light tomorrow night and many nights after that."

"But I shall not be here—in your arms, I mean," said the girl. "I should not be here at all, should never even have spoken to you, but I have made a bargain with myself—and maybe with God. I don't know. Just to be with you this last night, I have traded all the rest of the nights there are. I have promised never to see you again."

Young John Procter sensed that she was sincere in her statement. He reached for her, and she came into his arms willingly.

She clung to him with tears in her eyes.

"God help me, I love you!" The words slipped over her lips in awed whispers.

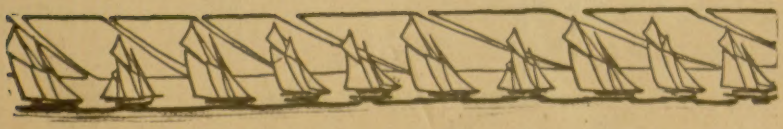
"And I love you!" he responded passionately.

"Now then," he spoke soberly after a moment of blissful silence, "I want you to explain all this nonsense about not seeing me again."

"I suppose I must explain," the girl began slowly. "But I hate to think of how you will despise me."

"Rubbish!" He held her just close enough so that she could breathe and speak without interfering with his consciousness that her heart and his were beating in unison like a couple of triphammers.

"You do the explaining," he said, and I'll provide whatever hating is necessary afterwards on condition that I don't have to let go of my grip to do it."



Chapter 47

THE FATHER'S EDICT.

WITH HIS face glowing with eagerness, John Procter waited for the girl to speak. He wondered what she had to explain to him. Three times her eyes were shyly lifted to meet his. Three times they dropped in obvious confusion. He became conscious that she clung to him almost like a frightened child. He noticed how her sensitive lips quivered. Finally they parted to speak.

"To begin with," she said, her voice holding a regretful note, "I am a thief. I had to steal everything I have given you. Those kisses and—and everything else belong to someone else."

"To whom?" he demanded.

"To the man who will some day own all this." She described a circle with her bare arm. "I mean young John Procter who will some day be your boss if you stay here."

Young Procter sat stunned, trying to comprehend the meaning of the statement she had just made.

He understood readily enough that she did not know he was John Procter himself. It had been such fun to keep her in the dark as to his identity.

But just why her adorable kisses should belong to him save by conquest was more than he could fathom.

"The reason that I tell you this, is because I love you," she started off again very simply, "and because I trust you to keep my confidence safe in that boy heart of yours that is so close to mine."

Continued in next number

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